

Paradise Lost?

Rediscovering Tradition in Aruba

By Sam Cole

The original inhabitants of Aruba were Arawak Indians, and a marked Indian cultural heritage still survives among some 20-25 percent of the island's diverse population of 60,000. In many respects the history of Indian communities in Aruba has been less traumatic than elsewhere; they have shared in the wealth created by the major oil refinery and benefited from Dutch-inspired welfare systems. Despite this, however, the Indian population of the island experiences the marginalization common to other such communities.

While the refinery brought wealth, it also wrought a profound shift in the process of social integration that was underway on Aruba, displacing much of the traditional way of life. With the imminent closing of the refinery, the island now faces the prospect of a substantial decline in wealth; with the onset of independence, it is not obvious that distributional norms will or can be maintained. There is doubt also whether the past can be regained. Indeed, as with other societies that have enjoyed brief moments of glory, the age of the refinery may be viewed in the future as Aruba's "paradise lost." Unfortunately this paradise, with its hierarchical and patronizing structures so characteristic of colonial and neocolonial societies, has compromised many Arubans, leaving them in limbo between the old and the new. In a metaphorical sense, they are confined in the prison of another culture.

Aruba is now faced with the loss of a major portion of its income and, during the next decade, the prospect of full independence from Holland. Despite the obvious difficulties this formidable combination of events might present, the removal of the major carriers of colonizing culture may enable traditional values to play a greater role in the island's future development. Just as

the departure of the refinery may relieve some of the cultural pressure on the community, it may also leave an economic space within which local systems of production can be further developed.

Colonial Antecedents

From a colonialists point of view, Aruba was an uninspiring proposition. Arid, and with unreliable rainfall, the island was little used except by Indians paddling from the mainland to fish and escape other warring Indians; and later by Spanish warships as a free-ranging ranch to keep a few cattle and goats, by pirates as a haven from authority, and finally by the Dutch, for whom the island was in effect a penal colony for miscreants from Curaçao. The latter was always the more important colony and also the center of Dutch slave trading in the Caribbean. But from the Indians' point of view, all these factors added up to one thing: they survived, some until the mid-19th century when slavery was finally abolished in the Dutch colonies, and today around 10-15,000 of the Aruba community can be said to have an Indian heritage.

Dutch and other Europeans arriving as traders and small plantation owners brought African slaves to Aruba. Although the extent of slavery there was considerably less than in most other islands of the Caribbean, the manner in which these groups integrated was crucial to the future social and economic situation of the Indians. At the time of emancipation, land was distributed, but only to people born free—mainly Indians. Indeed if there are significant differences today in the situation of the modern Indo-Aruban, they may be best explained by the land tenure system at and after emancipation, and by the situation of the Afro-Arubans. By the time African slavery in Aruba began, a fair degree of procreation between whites and Indians had taken place and, with this, a permanent kinship bonding.

After emancipation in 1864 some further integration occurred, and the last pure Indians disappeared. Relatively wealthy political refugees from the mainland arriving in the late 19th century became the final major

component of the so-called "real Arubans"—the inhabitants prior to the arrival of the oil refinery. Although this group exhibited some of the characteristics of an emerging nation, the process of change was slow. The economic organization consisted of European merchants with a workforce of African freemen, small *estanzias* with a retinue of Indians, and numerous peasant homesteads—in other words, most groups continuing in their previous occupations. Significantly for the future development of the Indians, they continued to play less organized or structured roles in this cultural division of labor, clearly different from workers from a rigid plantation or European tradition, who over the years have come to make up the majority of Aruba's population.

As the overall economic climate in Aruba became increasingly bad due to droughts, a short gold rush, and the ever-increasing goat population which prevented revegetation, the subsistence agriculture of the island suffered. Consequently, some 50 percent of the male labor force turned to migrant work on farms and mines on the mainland and on the sugar plantations of Cuba. The women were left behind to till the land, look after the homesteads and raise the children.

From Subsistence to Affluence

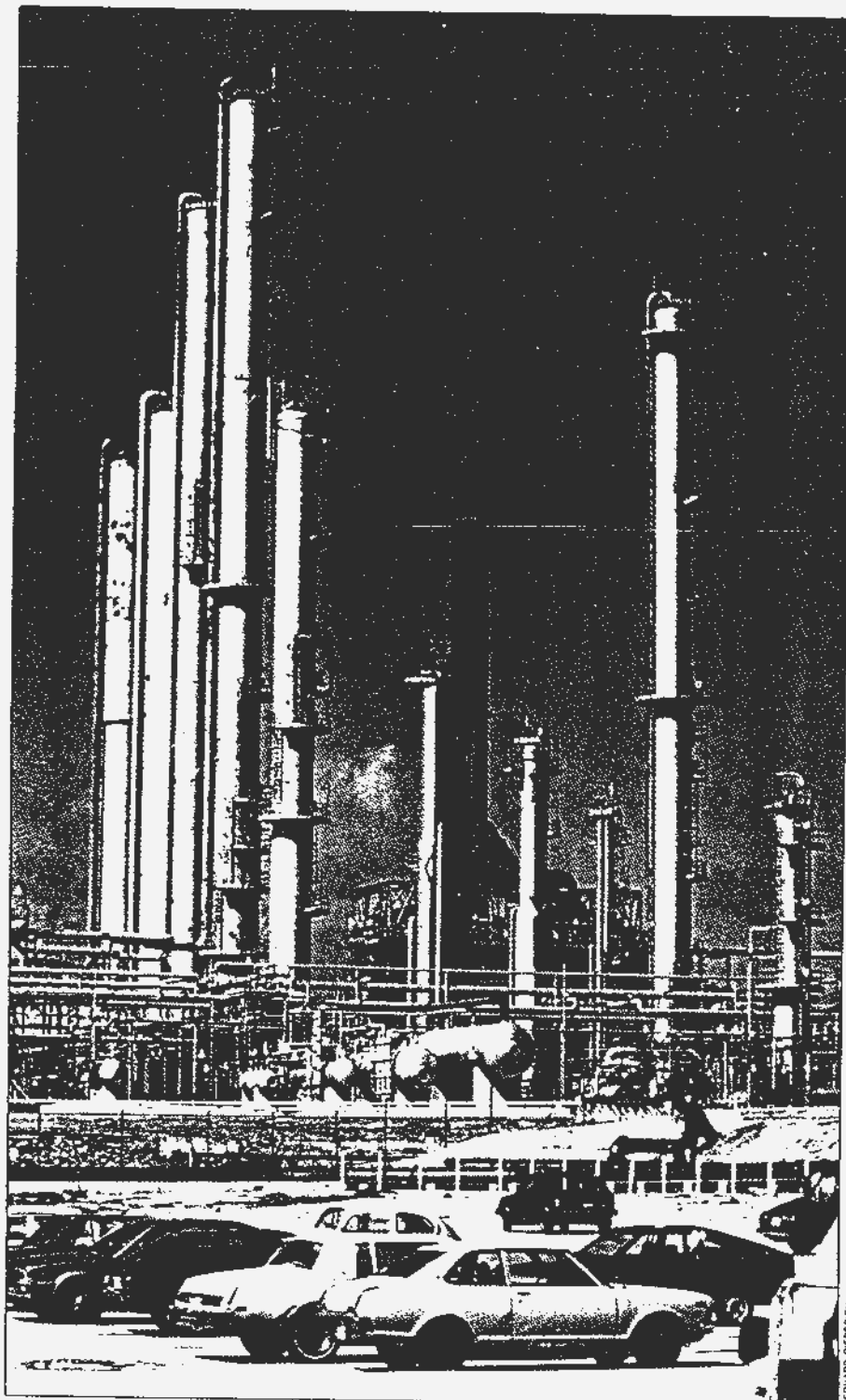
The arrival of the Lago oil refinery (later part of Exxon) in the late 1920s dramatically changed the situation of the Indo-Arubans. According to historian Johannes Hartog, "the Aruban pattern of life, hitherto providing a few simple means of subsistence yielding a meager income, all at once had to give way to a much more rigid one, outlined by fixed wages and provisions that were to affect both employers and government." The demand for labor far exceeded the number and skill of the local labor force, and the American-owned company recruited in the British West Indies and the English-speaking Windward Islands of the Netherlands Antilles. Compared to these new workers, who were the "cream of the Caribbean" labor force, the Papiamentu-speaking Arubans, and especially the Indians, were disadvantaged in several re-

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spects, and they had many problems integrating into the new work culture. This situation affected the Dutch-speaking Arubans also; but as the economy expanded to cope with the growing population of the island, they secured jobs in administration, commerce, and a smaller oil terminal (which later closed).

In terms of their work skills, therefore, the Indo-Arubans were again bypassed by the new economic activity on the island. Unlike the richer European-Arubans, they could not afford to educate their children abroad. This economic weakness, however, was compensated for by their social position. Indian families were typically related to, or had long-standing working relationships with, the half dozen or so leading families on the island, and most owned a small amount of land which provided a supplementary existence. With an expanding economy, plenty of casual work, familial generosity, and greater opportunity to retain a "traditional" attitude, the Indians were able to take part in the rapidly increasing consumption but generally without integrating into the work environment.

The influence of the American population, like the Dutch, was always disproportionate to its size. Indeed, although the legislative and judicial systems are Dutch, these are barely more than a veneer on the Americanization of the culture through the close contact of the workplace. The American immigrants came to provide new role models with regard to consumption and formed a new economic and social elite, distinct from the existing families and non-Caribbean immigrants. While many Arubans joined the oil refinery and earned relatively high wages, for Arubans who failed to adjust to the foreign language and work practices, their extended family and land tenure offered a tolerable alternative. By contrast, the English-speaking Windward Islanders, while entering at the bottom of the social hierarchy (and remaining there until a new wave of Caribbean immigrants arrived after the war), adjusted better to the paternalistic structure of the oil company and, because of their more relevant skills, were better poised to make economic pro-



Lago Oil Refinery, Aruba.

gress. In essence, the majority of the "real Aruban" population, whatever its internal divisions, became sandwiched between the two groups of new immigrants.

With the arrival of the refineries, the local population turned away from agriculture and fishing. Fresh water was produced by distillation at the Lago refinery and later by the island authorities. Electrical-generating windmills which tapped the steady trade winds to provide lighting were replaced by a

central distribution system. With respect to individual values, Hartog speaks of a "complete revolution" pointing to the shift from frugality to consumerism. The consumerist style of life enjoyed by most Arubans today mimics that of the dominant culture: the number of private vehicles, television sets or air conditioners are typical of similarly wealthy societies. If these items are not found in more traditional homes, it may be

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only a matter of income. The social environment creates constant pressures to consume. The advent of tourism and television in Aruba (both now also coming from Venezuela) has strongly reinforced the strong desire for material goods as status symbols. Nevertheless there are some changes apparent. While tastes in food and consumption generally shifted towards the "hamburger" culture of the United States, there has been a steady demand for traditional crops. Similarly, although Arubans for many years rejected the peasant cottages of the past for modern air conditioned housing, they are increasingly seeking older housing for modernization.

The question remains, though, in what sense can the island support this revived interest in the older ways? Although many traditional and modern homesteads today grow a small amount of vegetables and fruit and a good number grow maize or keep goats, all of this activity is informal. Some recent attempts to organize it into an allotment system are too embryonic to be evaluated. Commercial agriculture is primarily the battery farming of chickens and pigs or the spasmodic attempts to introduce modern techniques such as hydroponics. Because of the ease with which cheap produce can be "dumped" from Venezuela or shipped in from the United States, the maintenance of a commercial agriculture sector is difficult. In addition, the tradition of working the land for a living is unpopular in Aruba, as in many other Caribbean societies, reflecting the alienation instilled by the plantation tradition, the lack of income provided by farming, and the low esteem placed on this activity by the new dominant culture.

Present Realities

This brief discussion might suggest that the question of return to traditional values is passé, or that the situation is beyond the point of no return. First, the ecology of the island is probably unable to support more than a few thousand people without considerable time, effort and expenditure. Second, this style of life no longer seems consistent with people's aspirations despite the commonly expressed sentimentality for a bygone age. However, there are a number of reasons that further investigation is warranted, not the least of which is that the economy may no longer be able to support all islanders in the manner to which they have become accustomed. Beyond this, some evidence indicates that acculturation has been incomplete. Most important is the marginalization of many traditional

Arubans from the dominant work environment. Although Indo-Arubans are to be found at all levels in the private and public sectors, the relatively few in management positions compared to Euro-Arubans, or in skilled and middle-management jobs compared to Windward Islanders is evident. Typically their formal employment is in less responsible jobs; even today this group is trying to bridge the gap between traditional and modern modes of work.

There are several possible alternatives for the future of Aruba, from more rapid modernization to a more leisurely pace of development. Despite the bounty of material

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well-being brought to the island by the refinery, a sentiment often expressed is that the refinery has undermined the earlier, more idyllic way of life. The question arises, therefore, whether the departure of the oil refinery could not provide an opportunity for some redirection of development which is more in keeping with the traditional values of the community.

With the departure of the refinery it is possible that Arubans may experience greater pressure to conform to international patterns of work (in an effort to maintain their living standards) or, alternatively, may find an opportunity to reorient their work patterns towards those which are less in conflict with traditional values. A vital question is in what sense the contradiction between old and new exists in the psychological make-up of modernized indigenous communities. For instance, one hypothesis would be that a process of enforced rapid change, such as that experienced by Indo-Arubans, demands a dual mind-set—a conscious or unconscious schizophrenia—which enables individuals to operate within the externally-imposed work environment while retaining their memory and use of traditional reality. In some cases this compartmentalization may work very well. For example, a Dutch-trained Aruban nurse may perfectly well "act out" the doctor's instructions for administering to a patient; but that same nurse may also advise the patient in the traditional cures. The first behavior is "playing the game"; the second is reality.

This suggests that for some people there may be a very clear distinction between their two cultures—as sharp, complete and consistent as two distinctive languages, but

without the ability to translate between them. Others may integrate the two components; even if they cannot totally reconcile contradictions, they are able to recognize and accommodate them. Still others neither integrate nor compartmentalize well; these typically face the greatest difficulties. To the extent that a clear and consistent memory of the traditional culture remains, it is possible that reemphasizing that culture largely entails switching to another frame of mind. Provided the appropriate physical and social environment exists, this may indeed be possible.

The stepping back to reconnect with the past may be also an important step forward for a culture whose progress has been blocked or overwhelmed by the imposition of an external regime. Once more coherent points of contact between the old and new are established, the foundation for more self-determined development is laid. In the short run, at least there are some difficult trade-offs to be made, even though a more agreeable way of life could emerge. Whether this is acceptable depends in large part on the extent to which Arubans today identify with their Indian past. □

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